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Growing Dissatisfaction in Egypt

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GROWING DISSATISFACTION IN EGYPT

Reports from Egypt during the past year indicate that dissatisfaction is increasing among various segments of the Egyptian population. This is especially so among the middle class and intellectuals, elements whose allegiance and support are necessary for the realization of the Nasir regime's revolutionary goals. Although the mood of disaffection appears to be fairly widespread and detracts considerably from the already tarnished luster of Egypt's revolutionary hopes, it remains diffused and at present does not represent a threat to the regime. The majority of the malcontents are not dissatisfied enough to attempt any action to change the political situation, and Nasir's extensive and competent security forces keep a watchful eye on possible troublemakers.

The Background

The overthrow of the monarchy in July 1952 was greeted by the Egyptian people with much rejoicing and expectations of immediate changes which would greatly improve living conditions. The first flush of revolutionary enthusiasm was soon dimmed, however, with the realization that Egypt's enormous social and economic problems required drastic methods for their solution. When no improvements were immediately forthcoming, and when these harsher techniques were applied and began to impinge more upon the broader aspirations and interests of the middle and upper classes, their disenchantment with the Nasir regime began to grow. In the last two or three years, this feeling has become more pronounced, and apparently continues to spread.

To combat this malaise, and to engender a new political and social awareness in the apathetic public Nasir has tried a number of political instruments. The latest of these is the Arab Socialist Union (ASU), established in 1962. Its final form is still evolving and at present it does not command a strong or enthusiastic mass base. Basically the ASU is set up in an elaborate pyramidal structure, supposedly embracing all elements of the population. It is supposed to explain government policies to the masses, sample public opinion, bring promising leaders to the fore, and fight apathy and deviation from the Nasir line. Until the ASU develops into an effective organ, however, Nasir is relying on his large security forces--including a modern police force of over 100,000--to control the populace and check any dissident elements.

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The Disenchanted:
Case Histories

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There is, for example, the head of one of Egypt's state-run factories. Notified that he had been dismissed from his post because he was not in sympathy with the ASU, he chose to fight the move. He managed to get access to an ASU security file on him, which revealed that his telephone had been tapped and that long-time members of his household staff had been reporting on him. Even though he was eventually reinstated, the experience has left him bitter, unhappy, and distrustful of the regime.

A Coptic professor of geology at Cairo University is another among the disenchanted. During a discussion with a US Embassy official he complained in despair of the lack of direction of the government and of the rumored arrests of journalists and ASU youth leaders. Many people he knows, he said, like himself "just don't give a damn anymore." He claimed that his students will not study, rarely come to class, and generally make little effort to learn. His complaints also covered governmental inefficiency, the confused state of educational planning, and the deteriorating economic situation. Currently he is trying to arrange a year of research and study abroad, to

get away from the stifling atmosphere of Egypt.

Another disaffected individual is a deputy editor of the influential Cairo newspaper Al-Ahram. He is currently planning to emigrate to Canada or the US, whichever visa comes first. In a discussion with a US Embassy official, he listed reasons for his decision to leave Egypt. There is a growing vulgarization of Egyptian intellectual and political life, he said, and corruption, both material and intellectual, is increasing. People are losing their last ounce of pride and self-respect and will do anything to keep their jobs or qualify for advancement. There is a total disregard for the basic principles for governing Egypt which have been embodied in Nasir's policy declarations, and this has led to a lack of direction and purpose in the country. A new class of bureaucratic opportunists is emerging, but, according to the editor, Nasir is so far removed from reality he does not grasp the size and depth of the "process of decay."

Causes of Unrest

Except for occasional shortages, lower class wants are still met and so long as they are, no serious complaints are anticipated at this level. Government subsidies on particularly scarce consumer items help provide equitable distribution at low prices.

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The middle and upper class elements, however, are more directly affected by restrictions on the import of luxury and semi-luxury goods. As a person moves up the economic scale, his definition of what is needed for the good life expands to include many items that are either scarce or unavailable. When a store receives a shipment of such items as plastic sandals, fluorescent bulbs, nylons, or perfume, lines begin to form almost immediately, and the merchandise is soon gone, causing no small amount of bitterness among those who arrive too late. This sort of austerity is unlikely to ease over the next few years, and indeed will probably worsen as more sources of foreign credit dry up. It is not eased by the salary scales of many professionals. Most instructors, for example, must hold down two or more jobs just to support their families.

There are other roots of disaffection more serious than the material shortages, however. Many persons in the middle class, the professions, and intellectual groups find the regime's socialist policies increasingly stifling. Recently, the ASU introduced two compulsory courses into university curriculums: one on "Socialism" and the other on the "Glorious Revolution." This has disturbed many faculty members, who resent this government encroachment and see it as another step toward doctrinaire socialism.

The regime's full employment policies--resulting in overstaff-

ing and make-work positions--have led to frustration and discouragement on the part of those whose skills are actually in short supply, while bureaucratic stagnation smothers initiative. For example, well-qualified experts can be found wasting their time doing menial chores in already overstaffed laboratories or offices; a Western-trained engineer is teaching bricklaying in Alexandria; 38 recent university graduates, with BS Degrees in Agricultural Extension, were still looking for jobs four months after graduation. This has led many, especially those acquainted with Western efficiency, to think of emigration. In 1966, 170 professionals migrated to Canada. While the figure is not numerically impressive, these people are often among the best in their fields, making this for Egypt a serious and alarming "brain drain."

Egypt currently has over 200,000 students in colleges and higher institutions at home, and over 5,000 abroad, 1,200 of them in the US. Most of the latter seem well aware of the conditions they will face when they finish their studies and return to Egypt. Many are concerned about their opportunities there, and a number think seriously of staying in the Western countries where better paying jobs are available. Egyptian students at one large US university met recently to discuss the problem, going so far as to draft and send a letter to Nasir which expressed concern about their opportunities in

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Egypt. Nasir is aware of this attitude among students abroad. In August 1966 he held a meeting of student delegates which primarily included Egyptian students abroad. He attempted to reconcile them to life in Egypt by instilling in them some of his revolutionary fervor.

Hard evidence of unrest resulting from Nasir's adventures in Yemen is more difficult to come by, but the cost of the war has contributed to Egypt's economic woes, and thus to the shortages and the austerity. Although no reliable figures on Egyptian losses in Yemen are available, many Egyptian families presumably have experienced personal tragedy through the casualties suffered in that war. The morale of the armed forces has probably also suffered somewhat from the stalemate there, and from the reluctance of most lower class Egyptians to leave their homeland. The extent of any unrest in the army is not known, but Nasir has been careful to give his troops preferential treatment while at the same time keeping a close watch on them for signs of disloyalty.

The "antifeudalist" campaign, which involves both property sequestrations and arrests, has been sporadically enforced since 1961 and adds to the unrest. This campaign is apparently designed to wipe out remaining elements of the country's conservative bourgeoisie, to sound the note of limited class warfare, and to mobilize support for the regime among the Egyptian masses.

The revival of this campaign in recent months has contributed to uneasiness and fear among some intellectuals as well as among those property owners more directly affected.

[redacted] a number of army officers were transferred as a result of the campaign, while [redacted] the resignation of a major general after "antifeudalist" measures were taken against him and his family. The harsh techniques used, as well as the actual sequestrations, have reportedly generated considerable apprehension. It would not be surprising to find among the large number of senior government officials and military officers who come originally from the so-called "feudal classes" many who are out of sympathy with this campaign or who harbor feelings of bitterness.

Because of the strong conservative Islamic element in Egypt, elements of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan) who have survived the numerous purges over the years represent further bastions of discontent. Although the program of this group calls for some measure of social, economic, and political reform, its espousal of traditional Islamic concepts as the basis for a modern state conflicts with Nasir's more revolutionary goals. He therefore looks upon this group as perhaps the major internal threat to his regime, and is continually on the alert for signs of Ikhwan plotting. The extent of Nasir's concern is reflected in the violence of his reaction to

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Saudi Arabian attempts to form an Islamic Alliance of conservative Muslim states--those states which Nasir believes finance Ikhwan activities in Egypt.

The threat posed by the Ikhwan does not appear to be great at present, but it does represent a potential rallying point for Nasir's conservative opposition. During the summer of 1965, the accused rounded up during a crackdown on alleged Ikhwan conspirators included a number of Western-trained professionals, doctors, and engineers. This was rather surprising since such individuals would not appear to be especially attuned to Muslim traditionalism.

Although Nasir has sporadically suppressed local Communists, they do not appear to represent any notable body of discontent within Egypt today. Their ideology has little appeal for the average Egyptian, and the groups which do exist, numbering 400 to 600, appear to be split over basic issues. Prominent leftists of ability are being used by Nasir in some government positions, however, particularly in the press. Nasir apparently feels he can utilize their talents here while keeping an eye on them.

Minority groups in Egypt are not a formidable source of opposition to the present regime and Christians, chiefly Coptic

Orthodox, make up only about seven percent of the population. Coming generally from the upper middle class, they live among the Muslim majority in conditions of overt and hidden discrimination and are more likely than the Muslims to harbor grievances against the regime and to see emigration as the solution.

Some of the malaise among Egyptians can also be attributed simply to weariness. The regime has been in power for 13 years, and is beginning to creak somewhat under the pressure of the rapid pace of changes effected during that period.

Outlook

The Nasirist policies in effect since the late 1950s, aimed at transforming the essentially traditional Egyptian society into one oriented toward radical change and modernization, were bound to meet with some opposition. The pains involved in this transformation are not likely to diminish in the next few years, and some degree of dissatisfaction and unrest among various segments of the Egyptian population almost certainly will grow. Until the disaffected find some focus or rallying point, or some charismatic leader, however, they are not likely to constitute a serious threat to the existence of the Nasir regime.

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